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BUILDING PEACE AMID TURMOIL: WHAT ROLE CAN THE EU PLAY IN MYANMAR'S FRAGILE PATH TO STABILITY?

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Building Peace Amid Turmoil: What role can the EU play in Myanmar's fragile path to stability?

The security environment in Myanmar has been at a critical point for the past few years. Since the 2021 military coup under General Min Aung Hlang, security challenges have reached critical levels both internally and regionally, also spreading beyond Myanmar's borders. Moreover, Refugee inflows, especially into Bangladesh and Thailand, have added to the already existing challenge of the Rohingya Crisis. Violent actions towards this Muslim ethnic minority have put the lives of many civilians at risk and forced them to migrate to Bangladesh, but also to other Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. The stateless Rohingya population had been facing years of persecution in Myanmar when the security challenge escalated into a broader regional issue and other countries started rejecting their entrance in 2015. Despite international efforts to address the ongoing security challenge in Myanmar, the military junta's rule continues to cause regional instability. This is particularly evident in the evolving migration crisis of the Rohingya ethnic group. This Special Briefing Paper will delve into the EU's involvement in the region and potential new avenues to improve stability. What have Brussels and ASEAN done so far in Myanmar, and how can they work together in the future to safeguard citizens' rights in the nation?

EU involvement in Myanmar

For years the EU had been a close cooperation partner of Myanmar. In

the 2007–2013 period, the EU invested a total of 125 million EUR, increasing its economic contributions to 656 million EUR throughout 2014–2020, in response to the country's shifting geopolitical landscape.

One of the pillars of successful peacebuilding operations is a comprehensive contextual analysis of the local cultural, economic and political environment. This asset facilitates well-informed diplomatic tactics. In the case of Myanmar, the EU enriched its understanding of local practices through its field presence in humanitarian and development programmes, such as the OCHA Humanitarian Response Plan and the World Food Programme Strategic Plan. Moreover, with the opening in 2012 of the EU Delegation in Yangon it became possible to enhance the implementation of political and peacebuilding support programmes, which also gained support from the EEAS Mediation Support Team. Brussels supported Myanmar's democratisation process that began in 2012, backing Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD). However, with the outbreak of the Rohingya crisis and despite previous acclaim for her human rights efforts, Aung San Suu Kyi's justifications for the severe human rights abuses were not received well by international partners like the European Union. The EU responded by distancing itself from her and her government, as her new position was not in line with European principles. This move somehow decreased the capacity of the EU to influence decision-making processes in Myanmar, as its "policy fluctuations" and shifting political positions towards Myanmar's government created a growing sense of distance between them.

Overall, the EU peacebuilding efforts in Myanmar can be seen as an example of “preventive diplomacy”, aiming to “prevent existing disputes from escalating into conflicts and to limit the spread of the latter should they occur.” To make a meaningful impact on Myanmar’s peacebuilding process, the EU has formed partnerships with local and international NGOs, multilateral organisations and regional bodies. Before the coup, the EU’s peacebuilding strategy in Myanmar was centred around four main objectives: strengthening democratic governance; promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms; facilitating conflict resolution and reconciliation; and providing humanitarian assistance and development aid. To reinforce democratic governance, the EU supported institutions upholding democratic principles and fostering inclusive political dialogue. Its human rights initiatives focused on protecting minorities and vulnerable groups, ensuring freedom of expression, and empowering civil society. Efforts to resolve conflicts prioritised dialogue between opposing parties and reconciliation initiatives. Meanwhile, its humanitarian assistance was designed to address immediate needs and facilitate long-term development.

Since the 2021 coup d’état the number of individuals in need of humanitarian assistance in Myanmar has only increased, reaching a total of 18.6 million of people in need (one-third of the population). In response to this increased humanitarian need, the EU had released a total of 36.9 million EUR in support by June 2024, including over 3 million EUR in regional response initiatives, of which 15 million EUR in 2024. The EU has taken a stance against the military junta, condemning the regime’s

human rights violations, standing in solidarity with the people of Myanmar. Additionally, the EU has implemented various sanctions and restrictive measures. The Annex to Decision 2013/184/CFSP imposes targeted sanctions against officials linked to the military junta. Those that are listed within the Annex are subject to a freeze of funds and/or economic resources, as well as a travel ban to the EU. Between 2021 and 2024 there have so far been eight rounds of sanctions against Myanmar, formulating listings with new individuals or companies that have ties with the military regime. In addition, the EU has been contributing through various peacebuilding initiatives, of which the most relevant are the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MIMU) and the Joint Peace Fund. The EU has also supported the full implementation of the 2022 United Nations (UN) Security Council 2669 resolution. However, the volatile political environment, ethnic tensions, ongoing human rights violations and severe humanitarian crisis require the EU to carefully navigate these challenges.

Despite political divergences since the coup, the EU has maintained some trade relations with Myanmar. In 2022 the EU exported a total of almost 368 million EUR to Myanmar in the machinery, transport equipment and chemicals sectors. These trade relations might be at risk if the security challenges were to be approached through hard power measures. Since the coup the EU has been criticised for not committing to its own human rights and democratic ideals by various human rights organisations. However, ceasing all economic relations with Myanmar could risk generating a disruption of global value chains (GVCs), negatively affect the Myanmar

population and increase competition with Chinese enterprises.

Nevertheless, the political instability caused by the military junta continues to put the lives of Myanmar's citizens at risk through violence and repression. The military regime also jeopardises the effectiveness of EU long-term development projects, constraining its capacity to effectively engage through diplomatic means. The ongoing conflict has resulted in a deterioration of the economic situation and further complication of advancing development efforts. Overall, the conflict has had a severely negative impact on Myanmar's economic transition, thereby making it challenging for the EU to implement the long-term economic development projects it had in place before the coup.

Cooperation with ASEAN and international institutions

Contemporary politics require fast and effective strategies and implementation timeframes. This is a crucial aspect in preventing further civilian casualties and a deterioration of the situation in Myanmar. The EU should therefore engage more with regional partners, like neighbouring countries and ASEAN to increase regional cooperative engagement and improve support. Indian, Chinese and other countries' presence indicate the interests at play in Myanmar, also in bringing it into their respective spheres of influence.

Cooperation with ASEAN as a bloc constitutes an asset for both parties, as the EU and ASEAN by themselves can only address some aspects at a time. This is exemplified in for instance the lack of mechanisms and tools for a comprehensive conflict resolution (such as ethnic tensions),

or limitations in addressing the large-scale Rohingya refugee crisis. To deal with the Rohingya refugee crisis, ASEAN has been assisting through humanitarian actions conducted by the ASEAN Centre of Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) and the ASEAN Emergency Response and Assistance Team (ASEAN-ERAT). After the military coup in 2021, ASEAN adopted the Five-Point Consensus (5PC) to clarify its position on the conflict. These five points are:

1. There shall be immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar and all parties shall exercise utmost restraint.
2. Constructive dialogue among all parties concerned shall commence to seek a peaceful solution in the interests of the people.
3. A special envoy of the ASEAN Chair shall facilitate mediation of the dialogue process, with the assistance of the Secretary-General of ASEAN.
4. ASEAN shall provide humanitarian assistance through the AHA Centre.
5. The special envoy and delegation shall visit Myanmar to meet with all parties concerned.

Thus far, the regional framework has not obtained the results hoped for. Point 3 was almost accomplished, though facing difficulties due to the rotation of the ASEAN presidency and the neglect of entrance from the military junta into the territory, while the other points failed to be implemented or reach their full potential. In 2023 the ASEAN Leaders' Review and Decision on the Implementation of the Five-Point Consensus (RDI-5PC) was issued. Since the first attempt to solve the dispute failed, RDI-5PC was issued as

a second attempt to address the Myanmar crisis, implementing the first framework. Points 17 and 18 of the document are particularly interesting for the EU, as point 17 calls to “Mobilise further support from External Partners and the International Community to ASEAN efforts on humanitarian assistance by the 5PC,” while point 18 stresses to “Enhance cooperation among ASEAN Member States and between ASEAN with neighbouring countries of Myanmar, to address the crisis in Myanmar and its impacts, including the increase of transnational crime, such as drugs and human trafficking.” Encouraging international cooperation among regional and international partners, the EU could emerge as a more crucial external support source. This potential win-win cooperation between the two international organisations could significantly enhance support and make use of the EU’s peacebuilding capacity in Myanmar through the ASEAN framework. This would also enhance ASEAN actions, implementing its 5PC and increasing its economic security.

An increase in region-to-region cooperation between the two blocs could not only be beneficial for peacebuilding in Myanmar but also to overcome secondary challenges the EU is currently facing in Southeast Asia, like a growing distrust towards Brussels. However, with the regional focus on short-term economic challenges rather than broader concepts, its outspoken commitment to the rules-based order and its critical potential for economic support can help overcome these growing distrust challenges towards the EU.

So far, ASEAN implementation mechanisms have been facing a lack of resource availability. While the AHA centre focuses merely on coordinating

support mechanisms, there are no mandatory contribution requirements for ASEAN member states towards addressing the situation in Myanmar, making the effectiveness of peacebuilding practices highly reliant on contributions from ASEAN member states, but also the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) and other international NGOs. ASEAN has also been facing coordinating challenges among its member states, resulting in weaker action enforcement in Myanmar. Overall, the EU should increase its strategic coordination with ASEAN and individual member states to address security and development challenges in Myanmar.

Moreover, ASEAN and its member states could negotiate a new agreement to address the ongoing conflict in Myanmar. Based on previous initiatives this could include a dialogue with all stakeholders, including the National Unity Government (NUG), the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), political parties, civil society, religious and minority leaders, and ethnic groups to ensure a successful implementation of the agreement. The NUG consists of the 2021 established party formed by a coalition of democratically elected lawmakers in opposition to the military junta, and the CRPH is the body of people in Myanmar democratically elected. This approach could be combined with a clear enforcement mechanism, to avoid frictions as previously encountered with the 5PC, such as the neglected entrance in Myanmar of the ASEAN special envoy. In addition to the ASEAN special envoy, there could be the appointment of a UN special envoy and the designation of a Resident Coordinator.

Policy implementation

In addition to increasing international cooperation and partnerships with ASEAN and its member states, the EU could reconsider some aspects of its policies towards the conflict in Myanmar. So far, the EU has faced challenges in the peace-making process due to the intricacy of the conflict. Hard power and defence tactics have been drivers of international relations, and the leverage on them in the upcoming years is likely to increase. However, the increasing interconnectivity between nations and national factors, such as the economy, diplomacy, military, and culture, will make soft power tools more critical. The EU could adjust its policymaking towards Myanmar to make better use of this interconnectivity, and allow for a more efficient peacekeeping initiative in this sensitive area. Moreover, there must be a better integration of long-term goals into near-term decision-making.

Special Envoy for Myanmar, EU Ambassador to Cambodia and former EU Ambassador to ASEAN Igor Driesmans addressed the Myanmar issue at the 2024 Shangri La Dialogue, highlighting that the strategy of countering the military junta while supporting the civilians themselves will not foster security. This can be seen from the lack of significant results over the past years despite the EU efforts in this field. He suggested the promotion of four main points, notably inclusivity in mediation; international trust; cooperation between regional and international partners; and supporting local initiatives. However, given the scale of the risks in Myanmar, the use of an approach based on "mediation" and "trust" may be too weak at this point in the

conflict. Instead, there should be an increase in restrictive measures. These must include preventive actions, such as the cease of arms sales and military equipment transfer. Moreover, according to the June 2024 UN report Banking on the Death Trade: How Banks and Governments Enable the Military Junta in Myanmar, various international banks have not interrupted their transactions with Myanmar's state-owned businesses and banks in the last two years. Those banks are currently under the control of the military junta. Hence, by continuing transactions with Myanmar's state-owned business, international partners are providing financial support that will enable attacks on civilians and human rights violations. By circumnavigating sanctions, the oppression of civilians by the military junta is unlikely to decrease. Given the continuation of the "geopolitical commission" framework promoted under von der Leyen's leadership, Brussels could strategically leverage its economic power to prevent continuing investments of international banks into Myanmar, which facilitates the supply of military resources.

For the EU it would be crucial to ensure concrete measures focused on supporting local activities. To do so, related policymaking must be quick and comprehensive. The gathered information regarding sensitive zone-specific development can be collected through further cooperation with regional partners, as mentioned above. An additional increase in the physical presence of the EU through collaboration with national and regional bodies could allow for an increase in access to security. This will help mitigate the challenge of limited access to conflict-affected areas and address the security concerns for aid workers and partners on the ground coming from the EU's

restriction of operational capabilities. Employing these tactics will better ensure that economic funds sent to Myanmar are effectively implemented to improve public health and prevent sexual violence and conflicts. The EU's interventions must be conducted with great care, while still providing essential support to vulnerable populations, especially since there is a specific urgency of these actions due to the high local corruption and fraud.

By implementing policy-making processes and focusing on on-the-ground tools, it will be possible to ensure that aid reaches those in need. Moving forward, the EU should strategically leverage its economic power; enhance coordination with regional partners and increase physical presence, especially where there is an existing need. By incorporating these measures, EU support to Myanmar's security can contribute to its peacebuilding process and ultimately the protection of civilians.

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